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MAYO CLINIC HEALTH SYSTEM

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Medical Nutrition Therapy, Weight Management

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Are you getting enough protein?

Are you getting too much protein, not enough or just the right amount? The answer? It depends. Your gender, age, activities, use of weight-loss medication or supplements and other factors can affect your protein needs.

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Here are some answers to your questions about protein needs:

Are you getting too much protein?

Contrary to all the hype that everyone needs more protein, most people in the U.S. meet or exceed their needs. This is especially true for males ages 19-59. The Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2020–2025 (PDF) indicates that men in that age range exceed their protein recommendations, especially from meat, poultry and eggs.

Even athletes often get more protein than they need without supplements because their calorie requirements are higher. With more food comes more protein.

Are you getting enough protein?

Concerns about not getting enough protein arise when you're undereating or taking a weight-loss medication. People on a restrictive diet, diagnosed with an eating disorder or taking a weight-loss drug tend to skip meals. That starts a cascade of effects including not getting enough protein and greater loss of muscle mass, which isn't the type of weight you want to lose.

If you're trying to lose weight, it's essential that you don't skip meals. Eat a good source of protein three times a day to meet your body's needs.

Does a bigger steak equal bigger muscles?

Although adequate protein throughout the day is necessary, extra strength training is what leads to muscle growth — not extra protein intake. You can't build muscle without the exercise to go with it.

The body can't store protein, so once its needs are met, any extra protein is used for energy or stored as fat. Excess calories from any source will be

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Extra protein intake can also lead to elevated blood lipids and heart disease since many high-protein foods are high in total and saturated fat. Because it can tax the kidneys, extra protein intake poses an additional risk to people predisposed to kidney disease.

How much protein do you need?

Protein should account for 10% to 35% of your calories. So, if your daily needs are 2,000 calories, that's 200-700 calories from protein or 50-175 grams.

If you're an average adult.
The recommended dietary allowance to prevent deficiency for an average sedentary adult is 0.8 grams per kilogram of body weight. For example, a person who weighs 165 pounds, or 75 kilograms, should consume 60 grams of protein per day.

If you're over age 40-50.
Once you're between the ages of 40 and 50, sarcopenia — losing muscle mass as you age — begins to set in. To prevent this and to maintain independence and quality of life, your protein needs increase to about 1-1.2 grams per kilogram or 75-90 grams per day for a 165-pound person.

If you exercise regularly.
People who exercise regularly also have higher needs, about 1.1-1.5 grams per kilogram. People who regularly lift weights or are training for a running or cycling event need 1.2-1.7 grams per kilogram. Excessive protein intake would be more than 2 grams per kilogram of body weight each day.

If you're overweight.
If you are overweight, your weight should be adjusted before calculating your protein needs to avoid overestimating. A dietitian can help with this calculation and develop a personalized plan. Consulting with a dietitian is also a good idea if you're underweight or on weight-loss medications.

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The healthiest protein options include:

- Egg whites
- Fish or seafood
- Lean meats, such as skinless, white-meat chicken or turkey
- Low-fat dairy
- Plant sources, such as soy, nuts, seeds, beans and lentils

In general, you should try to meet your dietary protein needs with these whole foods instead of supplements, as long as your energy intake is adequate for building lean mass. Manufactured foods don't contain everything you need from food, and manufacturers don't know everything that should be in food.

When is the best time to consume protein?

It's better to spread out your protein consumption evenly throughout the day. On average, people get most of their protein from evening meals and the least from breakfast.

Some newer studies show that moving some protein from supper to breakfast can help with weight management by decreasing hunger and cravings throughout the day. More research is needed before these claims are verified.

General recommendations are to consume 15-30 grams of protein at each meal. Studies show that higher intakes in one sitting — more than 40 grams — are no more beneficial than consuming the recommended 15-30 grams at one time. Don't waste your money on more protein than you need.

What if you do want to use a protein

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If you want to use a protein supplement, here's what to look for per portion:

- 2 grams or less of saturated fat
- 5 grams of sugar or fewer
- About 200 or fewer calories
- No transfat or partially hydrogenated oils

What does 15-30 grams of protein from whole foods look like?

For example, an average-sized banana, Greek yogurt and a hard-boiled egg have 19 grams of protein. A 3-ounce chicken breast with a half-cup of rice and a half-cup of vegetables amounts to 25 grams of protein. An egg and bean burrito with a glass of milk is about 28 grams of protein.

As you can see, getting the recommended 15-30 grams per meal is easy. Most people — even athletes — can meet their protein needs by including a serving of dairy at each meal and a piece of meat the size of a deck of cards at lunch and supper.

Protein should accompany fruits, vegetables and whole grains, not make up your entire meal. If you feel you need more protein, consider adding more beans, lentils, soy or seafood rather than processed supplements.

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